DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 467 864 FL 027 381

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| AUTHOR | Ko, Jungmin |
| TITLE | An Exploratory Comparison of Oral Narrative Styles in Korea and the U.S. |
| PUB DATE | 1999-00-00 |
| NOTE | 12p.; In: Texas Papers in Foreign Language Education: Contemporary Issues in Foreign and Second Language Learning and Teaching, Fall 1999, see FL 027 379. |
| PUB TYPE | Journal Articles (080) -- Reports - Research (143) |
| JOURNAL CIT | Texas Papers in Foreign Language Education; v4 n1 p21-30 Fall 1999 |
| EDRS PRICE | EDRS Price MF01/PC01 Plus Postage. |
| DESCRIPTORS | College Students; Comparative Analysis; *English (Second Language); Films; Higher Education; Korean; *Native Speakers; *Oral Language; *Personal Narratives; Second Language Learning; Uncommonly Taught Languages |
| IDENTIFIERS | Native Language |

ABSTRACT

This exploratory study compares the narratives of three Korean speakers living in the United States with those of two native English speakers. The subjects viewed the film, "The Red Balloon," and were given three tasks: to recount the events in the movie, to describe what they would relate to their friends about the movie, and to describe what they saw as they simultaneously watched the movie a second tine. The study shows that the subjects interpreted and reproduced narratives from different genres in different ways. Within any given genre, however, the native and nonnative speakers responded similarly. Exceptions include conventionalized ways of opening and closing a narrative, tense usage, narrative length, and the handling of culturally significant lexical items. In addition, nonnative speakers spent more time organizing their thoughts and used metacognitive processing actively to plan what they could say and to minimize errors. (Author/SM)

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ED 467 864

# An Exploratory Comparison of Oral Narrative Styles in Korea and the U.S.

Jungmin Ko

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# *An Exploratory Comparison of Oral Narrative Styles in Korea and the U. S.*

JUNGMIN KO

*This exploratory study compares the narratives of three Korean speakers living in the United States with those of two native English speakers. The subjects viewed the film* The Red Balloon *and were given three tasks: to recount the events in the movie, to describe what they would relate to their friends about the movie, and to describe what they saw as they simultaneously watched the movie a second time. The study shows that the subjects interpreted and reproduced narratives from different genres in different ways; within any given genre, however, the native and nonnative speakers responded similarly. Exceptions include conventionalized ways of opening and closing a narrative, tense usage, narrative length, and the handling of culturally significant lexical items. In addition, nonnative speakers spent more time organizing their thoughts and used metacognitive processing actively to plan what they could say and to minimize errors.*

## INTRODUCTION

Language is the product of culture, and each cultural group has its own conventionalized ways of speaking. Over time, these ways of speaking change for various reasons, even within a single language group. One analytical method for examining these patterns of speaking and their changes is the analysis of narratives within the culture.

Several researchers have made important contributions to narrative analysis. Tannen (1980), for example, studied the relationship between culture and patterns of narratives. She investigated how members of different cultures transformed the same series of events into different narratives. Specifically, she compared how two language groups, Americans and Greeks, recounted the story of a film. Her research was based on the assumptions that culture influences narration and that language groups have conventionalized ways of telling stories.

Hicks (1991) investigated different genres of narrative productions, including sportscasts, news reports, and stories. Hicks assumed that we become aware of different genres early in childhood. Because children interact with other people in many different social settings, they soon learn how to adapt their language to different conventionalized ways of speaking and presenting knowledge.

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Dechert (1983) studied the cognitive operations used by a German second language learner narrating in the target language, English. According to Dechert, second language learners use both the L1 and L2 to activate metacognitive processing to plan what they are going to say. Such learners make use of "islands of reliability." Islands of reliability refer to phrases or sentences that the narrators can produce fluently and smoothly without hesitating, filling in pauses with um's, drawing out the length of words, or correcting themselves. Too high a processing load in a short time, however, causes second language learners to make errors at lexical and syntactic levels. In general, Dechert says that planning and telling a story are both a top-down and bottom-up, that is, a multidirectional process.

This exploratory study compares the narratives of three Korean speakers with those of two English speakers. Its goal is to answer or find approaches to answering the following questions:

i. Do subjects develop their narratives differently by task?
ii. Do language groups interpret narrative tasks differently?
iii. Do language groups have their own conventionalized ways of narrating?
iv. What kinds of strategies do nonnative speakers, in this case, Koreans, use when telling a narrative in English?

## METHODOLOGY

### Participants

Five subjects (four women and one man) participated in this study: Sarah, Rose, Junyi, Yongsik, and Miyeon. Sarah and Rose are native English speakers. Sarah is a sophomore in Art History at the University of Texas at Austin (UT). She is a Caucasian female from a middle-class family. Rose, who has a master's degree in English, is taking courses at UT for her teaching certificate. She is a female African-American from a middle-class family. Junyi, a freshman in Chemistry at UT, is a Korean female who came to the U.S. 6 years ago. Junyi spent her adolescent years in the U.S. Yongsik, a doctoral student at UT, is a Korean male who came to the U.S. 8 years ago. He possesses a high level of English-speaking proficiency. Miyeon graduated from a college in Korea and came to the U.S. with her husband in 1997. She is taking ESL courses at UT. She has some problems expressing herself in English.

### Material

The film used in this research is *The Red Balloon*, the same film used in Hicks' study. While Hicks used a shortened version of the film (15 minutes), this study

used the full version (34 minutes). The movie was produced in 1956 in France and won an Academy Award for Best Short Film. The movie has no spoken dialogue. The reason for using a silent film in this study was to eliminate potential confounding factors, such as the variability in levels of listening comprehension among the subjects and the effects of oral input on the subjects' interpretation and hence reproduction of narratives. A silent movie, moreover, imparts its meaning almost entirely by visual means, so that viewers are more likely to come away with an interpretation that more closely reflects their underlying ways of thinking.

The plot of the movie is simple. A young French boy makes friends with a red balloon, which joins the little boy as he goes to school and follows him throughout the day. A gang of other boys becomes jealous of the friendship between the two, until finally some gang members take the balloon away from the boy and pop it. At that point, all the balloons in Paris come to the boy and carry him into the sky.

**Procedure**

This study was conducted November 20-27, 1998, at UT. After viewing the film, subjects were given three tasks:

i. Respond to the question, "What happened in the movie?" This question was used in the Tannen (1980) study.
ii. Respond to the question, "What would you tell your friends who have not seen the movie?"
iii. Narrate the film as they watched the first 2 minutes a second time.

The Korean subjects were asked to narrate in Korean first and then in English. Their narration was audiotaped and transcribed.

**Analysis**

The data analysis was based on Tannen's research in which she identified the following variables of narration: maintenance of film perspective, descriptions of action, interpretation of events, interpretative naming, interpretative omission, attribution of causality, philosophizing/personalizing, and stylistic variation. Of those variables, this study borrowed maintenance of film perspective, descriptions of action (with a focus on verb tenses used in the narratives), interpretative naming, interpretative omission, and personalizing. This study found few interesting phenomena regarding interpretation of events, attribution of causality, and stylistic variation, so those variables were disregarded. Moreover, in this study, *personalizing* is defined as describing the balloon in terms

ordinarily used in describing a person; in contrast, Tannen defines personalizing as adopting an ethical point of view. For analyzing the responses to the questions, the study made use of the interpretative methods from Hicks (1991), while adopting Dechert's (1983) characterizations of the strategies used by second language learners. Finally, in its analysis of the subjects' interpretations, the study uses the category of maintenance of film perspective, as discussed in Tannen's study.

## RESULTS

### Verb Tenses Used in Narratives

Both of the native English speakers, Sarah and Rose, used the present tense throughout their responses to Questions 1 and 3. This observation coincides with Tannen's finding that native speakers exhibited a strong tendency to couch their narratives in the present tense. On the other hand, two of the three Korean speakers, excluding Yongsik, used the past tense in responding to Questions 1 and 3, both in their Korean and English language responses. Yongsik went back and forth between the past tense and the present tense in Korean, but used the present tense predominately in English.

### Interpretative Naming

Certain lexical items in the speakers' narratives seemed to convey culture-specific information. For example, in Question 3, the on-line task, Yongsik and Junyi initially used "a dog," rather than "a cat," in their narration. Clearly, however, the animal in the scene is a cat, not a dog. Eventually, both of subjects corrected the phrase "a dog" to "a cat."

Junyi. *A boy was on the way to school and then he sees little dog. And then he goes down to stairs. He still wants to play with* [a little bit hesitatingly] *a little cat, I think.*

Yongsik. *There's a dog, a little puppy. Oh! Actually it looks like a cat. So the boy is playing with a dog or a cat. I'm not sure.*

The source of this temporary confusion appears to be cultural. In Korea, a cat is considered a cunning animal, and its only domestic purpose is to catch rats; they are never seen as pets. Hence, Koreans find it difficult to imagine that a student might stop to pet a cat on the way to school.

The Koreans Junyi and Miyeon referred to the woman who stayed with the boy as his "mother." The native English speaker Sarah, however, described her as his grandmother.

Junyi. *When he finally got home, his mother threw it away.*

Miyeon. *He go home with red balloon and his mother didn't like the red balloon.*

Sarah. *When he finally gets home, his grandmother doesn't let him keep the balloon.*

Since the woman's relationship to the boy was not entirely clear in the movie, this scene was good for drawing out the speakers' unconscious thoughts. The Koreans tended to think of the woman as the boy's mother. A close look at the scene, however, reveals that the woman is much older than the boy's mother could be expected to be. Sarah appears to be right.

**Interpretive Omission**

The narratives by Korean speakers, both in English and in Korean, were shorter than those produced by native English speakers. Korean speakers tended to omit information that did not contribute to the theme. On the other hand, Americans tended to mention all the elements in a sequence of events.

**Personalizing**

Four of the subjects with the exception of Junyi personalized the red balloon. Sarah used the words "friends" and "person." Rose used the words "friends" and "pets." Yongsik used "friends."

Sarah. *The balloon is like a person. He becomes very good friends with it.*

Rose. *It seems to be almost like a pet. It's his friend.*

Yongsik. *They became friend each other.*

Miyeon's data were especially interesting. Miyeon described the balloon as "like a human" in English and "like [a] ghost" in Korean. In the Korean culture, the word "ghost" refers to some inexplicable phenomenon.

**Interpretation of Each Question**

***Responses to Question 1: "What happened in the movie?"***

Four subjects (not including Yonsik) tended to understand this question as a memory task. They tried to recall the story accurately and chronologically. Only Yongsik did not understand the question as calling for accurate recall; instead, he narrated only the main points of the story.

Unlike Tannen's (1980) results, in which native speakers of English narrated another silent movie, *The Pear Stories*, from a viewer's perspective, neither of the two native English speakers in this study narrated the movie from a viewer's perspective. They mentioned the word "movie" only in the beginning sentences of their responses. They never used words or phrases like *scene*, *viewers*, or *zoom in*, which would indicate that

the subject was speaking from a viewer's perspective.

In Sarah's narration, she balanced her attention between the first part, which consisted of the boy's befriending the balloon on the way to school, and the second part, which consisted of the other boys' grabbing and popping the balloon. As can be seen, the second part deals with conflict, in that the balloon is taken away by the gang of boys, then saved by the boy, and finally popped by the boys. Miyeon and Junyi focused attention on the first part, while Rose focused more on the second part, which, according to her remarks to the researcher, she thought to be the more interesting.

Sarah, Rose, and Yongsik began their narratives with at least one mention of the word "movie" or "balloon" and closed their narratives with "That's the end" or "That's how it ends."

Sarah. *The story of the red balloon...*
Rose. *This is a movie about a little boy and his balloon...*
Yongsik. *The main character in this movie are one boy and the red balloon...*

Sarah. *That's the end.*
Rose. *That's how it ends.*
Yongsik. *That's how it ended.*

These words may be indications of a conventionalized way of narrating the story of a movie in English.

Yongsik said "That's how it ended" both in Korean and in English, while Junyi and Miyeon gave closure to neither their Korean nor English narratives. They gazed at the researcher, who finally had to ask, "Is that the end?"

***Responses to Question 2: "What would you tell your friends who have not seen the movie?"***

All the subjects except Rose interpreted the question as requiring a brief introduction to their answer and an evaluation. They developed their narratives conversationally and tried to instill in their listener an interest in the movie.

*Sarah* *I just saw the neatest movie. It was about a little boy who finds this red balloon. But the balloon is like a person. He becomes very good friends with it. They go through all adventures together. It was so funny and cute. But it is sad at the end. I won't tell you what happened, because I want you to see the movie and it is so pretty, the balloon, the colors in the movie. So you need to see when you can.*

*Junyi* *I saw the movie called* The Red Balloon. *It's about a little boy about the balloon and kept following the boy. I think it has deeper meaning to the movie than what it actually happened but I can't really get the whole point. But at the end, he flied with lots of balloon.*

Yongsik. *I just watched the movie named The Red Balloon. And I heard that the movie was made in France in 1956 and got kind of prize from International Movie Festival. But that movie was really boring. Don't ever watch this movie.*

In contrast, Rose summarized the story in the first three sentences. After that, however, her response was not much different from the one she offered for Question 1, except that she narrated the story in a more lively fashion. Interestingly, she brought up the scene in which the boy happened to see a girl with a blue balloon; she had not mentioned this scene in her response to Question 1. In this response, she seemed to want to add appeal to her narrative by pointing out that the red balloon followed after the blue balloon, just as a boy might follow after a girl.

Rose. *And it will always be his balloon, except that there's another girl who is walking around that had a blue balloon. It seemed to be the same way. They bump each other. Her balloon flies out of her hand and chases back, because it seems that they like each other, like boys and girls.*

***Responses to Question 3: The On-Line Task.***

All five participants with the exception of Yongsik described only what was going on in the visual images. In Korean, Yongsik took a viewer's perspective and described not only what was going on at a given time but also what would be going on. In English, he just focused on what was going on at a given time.

Yongsik [Korean] *He's climbing up the lamppost. Of course, there will be a big red balloon up in the lamppost.* [The red balloon does not appear in the scene yet.]

Yongsik [English] *The movie just began. The one little boy appears in the screen.*

Rose also took a viewer's perspective in her introductory remarks, saying, "This is the old French film called *The Red Balloon.*" However, she never mentioned the word *film* again and just described what was going on.

**Strategies of Second Language Learners**

Before beginning their narration, Miyeon, Junyi, and Yongsik asked for some time to organize their thoughts, and they spent more time in organizing their thoughts than the native speakers did. They used more filled pauses (the interjection of "um"), hesitations, and drawls, indications that they needed more time to plan their narration and to avoid errors. Miyeon's speaking proficiency was the lowest among the subjects, and she had the highest frequency

of fillers, such as *um* and *no! no!* She especially temporized with *um*'s when she was confronted with challenging verbal tasks.

Miyeon *He could not enter the school and classroom with red balloon. (um) He go home. . . .*

Miyeon had plenty to say, but she realized that her vocabulary was too small for her to express her thoughts. Her use of the filler *um* signals the psychological process of "holding the floor" while she simultaneously plans the continuation of her narrative.

These nonnative speakers did not make any major language errors except those in respect to tense and lexicon. This and their use of filled pauses indicate they were actively engaged in metacognitive processing to plan what they could say with the fewest errors. However, it seems that narration in the L2 strained their abilities enough that errors in tenses persisted.

## LIMITATIONS

The researcher asked the subjects to narrate the story as if the addressee had not seen the movie. Nevertheless, the subjects, especially the Korean speakers, presumed that the addressee (the researcher, in this case) already knew the story. Consequently, a limitation of this study is that the data were gathered from conversational settings that are not entirely natural.

In this research, Questions 1, 2, and 3 were carried out in sequence; therefore, the subjects could have anticipated what would be required of them in the in-line task. For example, Yongsik narrated not only what was happening at a given point in the story, but also projected ahead from that point to later consequences or related action in the story. Thus, the order of the tasks could have influenced the results.

## DISCUSSION

The study shows that the subjects interpreted and reproduced narratives from different tasks in different ways; within any given task, however, the native and nonnative speakers responded similarly.

The responses of the research subjects to the three questions represented three different tasks. When answering Question 1, "What happened in the movie?" participants tended to interpret the question as a memory task. When answering Question 2, "What could you tell your friends who have not seen the movie?" the respondents tended to interpret the question as requiring a summary and evaluation. They developed their narratives conversationally and tried to instill in the listener an interest in the story. In Question 3, the on-line task, participants narrated the action as it unfolded.

In their responses to all three questions, the native and nonnative speakers showed that they had similar interpretations of the three tasks.

There seemed to be conventionalized ways of opening and closing a narrative, as well as culturally significant lexical items. In Question 1, openings and closings appear to be conventionalized in English. Both Sarah and Rose used an opening and a closing line in their English narratives, while Junyi and Miyeon, speaking in Korean, used neither. While Sarah and Rose personalized the balloon as a friend and a human, Miyeon referred to it as a ghost.

The biggest difference, however, between Korean and English narratives involved the tense and length of narratives. Native English speakers in the U.S. showed a strong preference for narratives in the present tense, while Koreans preferred to use the past tense. Narratives by Koreans were much shorter than American narratives. In addition, some lexical items, such as *ghost*, *dog*, and *mother*, conveyed culture-specific information.

Nonnative speakers spent more time organizing their thoughts and used more pauses, hesitations, fillers, and drawls (lengthening of words) than did nonnative speakers. By resorting to these temporizing devices, the nonnative speakers indicated that they actively used metacognitive processing to plan what they were about to say in an effort to minimize errors.

Exposure to speakers of the target language enables L2 speakers to acquire the target language narrative conventions. Yongsik came to the U.S. 8 years ago and worked for a company for a few years. He has remained in the U.S. longer than the other nonnative speakers, and he has had the most interaction with native English speakers. Even though he made many errors in his narration, he seemed to be comfortable while narrating in English. He used a conventional opening and closing in Question 1 and relied on the present tense in the on-line task, just as native speakers generally do in their narration.

This pilot study shows that Korean and U.S. speakers may have different conventionalized ways of narrating a story line or sequence of related events. Awareness of this difference should help Korean and native English speakers appreciate the patterns of narratives in each other's cultures and should help Korean students learning English narrative style. Moreover, not only does culture influence L1 narrative (Tannen, 1980), but also L2 narrative as seen in the case of Yongsik, who, by living in the U.S., acquired American narrative conventions.

Future research, naturally, is needed to determine how idiosyncratic the findings of this pilot

study were. As noted above, the English speakers in this study, unlike those in Tannen's, did not narrate the movie from a viewer's perspective. Besides simply increasing the sample size, though, efforts should be made to establish in what ways nonnative speakers acquire L2 narrative conventions and how long their acquisition takes. Moreover, research should examine how and if the L2 culture influences L1 narratives.

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